

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 703

EA 024 322

AUTHOR Mack, Carl, Jr.
TITLE Mistaken Identity and Issues in Multicultural Education.
INSTITUTION National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v23 n6 pl-4 Jul/Aug 1992

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Board of Education Role; Boards of Education; Cultural Differences; Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethnocentrism; *Multicultural Education; Public Schools; School Demography

IDENTIFIERS *Afrocentrism; *Eurocentrism

ABSTRACT

Working through a group approach with the community will help school districts reach a multicultural, multiracial consensus to ensure an excellent and equitable education for every child. There is a valid role for Afrocentric and Eurocentric concepts in a pluralist context which includes Hispanic, Native American, and Asian perspectives as well. School boards should continue to expand their efforts to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population in three areas: (1) development and implementation of board policy that improves the district's multicultural perspective; (2) assurance of affirmative hiring practices; and (3) review and refinement of the multicultural aspects of the district's curriculum. These actions should be driven by the single objective of improving student performance. A process referred to as the "three sets of three questions" strategy can help board members check on the soundness of any major proposal by dealing with three levels--personal, ramifications, and contingencies. (MLF)

reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
* from the original document. *

Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 23/Number 6/July-August 1992

A component of the National Education Policy Network of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA National Affiliates and NEPN subscribers

Mistaken Identity and Issues in Multicultural Education

ED349703

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL
IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN
GRANTED BY

F.F. Kourner

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Updating **SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES**

Volume 23/Number 6/July-August 1992

A component of the National Education Policy Network of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA National Affiliates and NEPN subscribers

Mistaken Identity and Issues in Multicultural Education

by Carl Mack, Jr., Ph.D.

In an article authored by Susan Barto appearing in *Updating School Board Policies* (December, 1990), our attention was brought to the current dynamics of the country's effort to "embrace" diversity through multicultural education." That article inspired this author to raise some questions for discussion regarding issues of ethnocentricity, pluralism, and multicultural education.

Every educator and every parent is concerned about his/her children's educational success regardless of ethnicity, or economic class, or any other sociological descriptor. However, bringing people of different races and cultures together to reach agreement about how a school district should educate their children often produces confusion rather than consensus. Multiculturalism is, perhaps above all, a process for developing mutual goals among people of diverse racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Within a school district, it is a process with profound implications for educational outcomes.

What multicultural education has to offer

This author suggests that there are six important tenets of what multicultural education should provide to our schools and our communities. The first of these is that it must improve the educational performance of every student. The remaining five tenets are drawn from Corey Cook (*The Davis Enterprise*, May 5, 1992):

- Multicultural education should offer a diversified curriculum that presents the views and perspectives of many peoples.
- It should be based on the assumption that there is no single correct interpretation of history.
- It must reflect an understanding that the curriculum achieves relevance by stressing comparative analysis through different cultural viewpoints.
- It must hold at its core the principle of eradicating racial/cultural/religious stereotypes.
- And, finally, multicultural education presents a balance between understanding cultural similarities and differences and encouraging individuals to maintain and broaden their own cultures and cultural perspectives.

For educators and education policymakers this means that we must be prepared to deal with and manage the dynamics that result from uniting diverse cultures, races, and linguistic groups. Focusing on this aspect of the issue — uniting many peoples — will lead to policy and procedural solutions that have the consensus of both those who are the decision makers and those who are directly affected by the decision.

A Way of Thinking: Moving from "them" to "us"

To date, whenever public school policy bodies attempt to confront the issues related to a diverse cultural student population, the standard operating procedure has been to look at the content of the curriculum and the composition of the school staff. This is an excellent starting place. However, trouble begins when this starting point does not lead to solution of the basic problem, i.e., the improvement of minority student performance on standardized tests, increased graduation rates and college matriculation, and higher employability levels.

If these objectives are not achieved, we can assume that other critical problems such as the eradication of stereotypes and development of a truly multicultural curriculum have not been appropriately addressed.

Failure of and/or disappointment with multicultural education programs often occur because the proposed solutions did not adequately address the real needs and desires of the various involved groups. In many instances, it is a well-intentioned majority group

continued on page 2

Inside Updating...

Court View p. 5

Corporal Punishment

Policy Adviser p. 8

Corporal Punishment

Multicultural Education
from page 1

that unwittingly creates the barriers to success. This is particularly true when the majority group foresees itself as being in transition from majority to numerical minority.

We can use ourselves, as school board members, as an example. School boards traditionally have been dominated by White citizens. Even within the setting of a minority board, the issues, definition of problems and solutions have been generally framed in the context of "White" thought, in contrast to collective thought where the White point of view is one among many. But, effective decision making in multicultural situations requires integration of all cultural points of view. This author believes that this is at the heart of the problem and is the source of developing lasting solutions.

To put it succinctly, White citizens, as the long-time majority racial group, are now going through a process of self-examination that is necessary if we are to work collaboratively to deal with the present demographic imperative. Indeed, ALL cultural/racial groups must examine their individual and group prejudices/opinions of one another. It is our White citizens who, by virtue of their established positions of leadership, are being called upon to do so first; in essence, to set the example. School board members and key administrators, in their particularly visible roles, have an obligation to provide the vision, the leadership, and the processes that assist and support continuing multicultural discussion and growth.

Working toward a group approach

Within the school district, policy and program development will ideally involve the school board, the district administration and staff, and the community. In a culturally diverse setting, it is important to recognize the situations in which the traditional majority group may not actually be the numerical majority any more. Their reactions to the changing reality are as important to understand and deal with as are the reactions of the previous numerical minorities.

A typical result of changing status is the real or perceived repression of the minority group(s) by the previous majority. If an Asian board member is not given what she believes is adequate time to speak, it really does not matter whether the repression is real or perceived; she will believe it is real, and collective action will be very difficult.

Repression occurs, or is perceived to occur, when the point of view of the "majority" group dominates the outcomes. "Majority" group members will often argue that their view is the only clear and reasonable one. This is most likely to happen when "majority" members do not see their children's education goals and objectives as commensurate with those of the "minority" group(s) children. It is also a result of the fact that "majority" group members frequently do not see themselves as part of the ethnic diversity in the community; there is the "majority" group and then there is ethnic and cultural diversity.

It is easy and all too usual to fall into the "them" and "us" trap, and to lose sight of the central issue: that it is through our collaborative skills and work that we will reach a multicultural, multiracial consensus regarding the education of a culturally, racially and linguistically diverse student population.

We can accomplish that notable — and necessary — goal only by undertaking the difficult task of self-reflection, remaining sensitive to real and perceived repression, recognizing the importance and truth of various viewpoints, and holding fast to the primary purpose of every school board member: to ensure an excellent and equitable education for *every* child.

**Ethnocentrism/
Afrocentrism/Eurocentrism**

We would be remiss if we did not address a concern that always surfaces in a discussion of multicultural education. The terms multiculturalism and ethnocentrism tend to be used interchangeably, and get all mixed up with Afro- and Eurocentrism. Perhaps reducing each word to its most basic meaning will help to put each in its proper perspective:

- Multicultural means made of many cultures.
- Ethnocentric means ethnicity, or race, is of central interest.
- Afrocentric means to be centered on Africa.
- Eurocentric means to be centered on Europe.

Unless great care is taken, interchanging these terms converts the primary issues of multicultural education into a format that can be discredited and abused. A closer look at these terms will help in understanding the valid role of all in a diverse education system. Since Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism seem to cause the most dismay and to be the least understood, we will focus on what they mean and don't mean.

continued on page 3

Updating School Board Policies is published eleven times annually and provided to every Board member and the policy administrator of school districts that participate in the National School Boards Association's National Affiliate Program or subscribe to NSBA's National Education Policy Network. NEPN Staff: Michael E. Eader, Associate Executive Director; Adria L. Thomas, director, research and management services department; Karen Powe, editor; Rachel deLesseps, research assistant. Contributing editors: Susan Butler, Sally Zakaniya, Lynne Glassman.

Opinions expressed in and by *Updating* do not necessarily reflect positions of the National School Boards Association.

Copyright 1992 National School Boards Association
All Rights Reserved. Permission to reprint articles may be requested through the editor.

NSBA President
E. Harold Fisher

Executive Director
Thomas A. Shannon

Deputy Executive Director
Harold P. Seamon

Associate Executive Directors
Don E. Blom
Michael E. Eader
Jeremiah Floyd
Susan P. Merry
Michael A. Resnick
August W. Steinhilber

**Multicultural Education
from page 2**

Differing Points of View

In the context of this discussion it is important to (1) include Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism as part of the cultural diversity mix and (2) to realize that Black and White does not represent the spectrum of cultural/racial diversity in the United States. There is an Asian (Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, etc.) perspective; an Hispanic perspective; a Native American perspective; and African and European perspectives, among others. Keeping this in mind, for the purposes of this article, this portion of our discussion will focus on describing some of the key elements of two cultural perspectives, the Eurocentric and Afrocentric views.

The Eurocentric View. What is this concept's composition? Mortimer Adler, Editor-in-Chief of *Great Books of the Western World*, presents a point of view that is reflective. His predominant theme is "the culture of citizens of the United States is founded upon the ideas of the philosophers and writers of Western Europe, from ancient Greece through the 17th and 18th Centuries Enlightenment in France, Germany and England."

Jacob Neuser argues that "we should continue to emphasize the history and culture of the West...because the West has in fact made the world we know." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol.35, No.23) The basis of the Eurocentrists' argument is that Western European culture should be regarded as the national culture of the United States.

The Afrocentric View The Afrocentric concept seems to be built upon four key points. One is the role of Africa as it relates to the origin of man and second is the role of Africa as it relates to the origin of civilization. Scholars have established both the archaeological and cultural anthropological evidence to support this fact. H.G. Wells refers to "this race of brunet-brown folk" as "...the beginners of what we call civilization." However, the present economic, social and political condition of African Americans in Western society would not seem to accept the logical consequences of such evidence.

The third point for proponents of the Afrocentric concept is the role of Kemet (Egypt) as the symbol of classical ancient African civilizations in which language, the use of iron, and the formation of government have their origin. The fourth element that permeates the writings of Afrocentric scholars has to do with the "the maintenance of the existence of one's race and culture." This is less a resistance movement against political domination and social degradation and more, as Chancellor Williams has noted, a "stubborn resistance to the extinction of the race itself through amalgamation" (*The Destruction of Black Civilization*, 1974).

Pluralism and Unity: Can we have both?

The dilemma for educators and education policymakers is: How can we effectively administer an educational system or program, for all children, when the society cannot decide how to acknowledge its diverse cultural origins and antecedents? The answer may lie in the interplay between the Afrocentric concept, as a pluralist perspective, and the traditionalists (the Eurocentrists) by helping us to acknowledge that, from a cultural point of view, the world is polycentric: There are as many center points as there are cultures to look out from.

Hugh Prather urges us to use a principle that states: I can be of no real help to another unless I see that the two of us are in this together, that all of our differences are superficial and meaningless, and that only the countless ways we are alike has any importance at all (Foreword in *Love Is Letting Go of Fear* by Gerald G. Jampolsky, 1979).

Working the Issue

Clearly, the United States has moved to a citizenry which is diverse in its cultural, racial and linguistic make-up. Barto suggests that by the middle of the 21st century the majority of the society will be "ethnic minorities." This author suggests that there will not be ethnic minorities; there will be a diverse ethnic population in America.

As school districts review their policies, education programs and hiring practices, it is of primary importance to implement an effective process that supports the view that all racial and ethnic groups, including majority groups, are part of the cultural diversity of our society. Too often when a new concept or paradigm emerges, we experience the need to throw out the old completely. This is not always necessary, or even desirable.

Rather, we must implement a process that supports integrating the old with the new. For those of us who provide educational services to a diverse student population and their families, we should not worry that the struggle between traditionalism and pluralism is going to destroy all of our previous learning or relationships. It is true that we are facing change, and often change creates a period of discomfort. However, if we "work the issue" (that is, work together to understand and resolve the issue), the time and experience can serve as building blocks for a new understanding that, in turn, can offer the potential of improving our educational services to children and their families.

The struggle between the pluralists and the traditionalists asks us to review our perceptions of American culture. Our culture is not necessarily what we have believed it to be. It is not static; it is not totally derived from a European center; and its antecedents do not begin with Greece. The American culture is in progress; it is in constant growth and development.

Recommendations for Board Action

This author suggests that school boards should continue to expand their efforts to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population in three areas:

- development and implementation of board policy that improves the district's multicultural perspective;
- assurance of affirmative hiring practices; and

continued on page 4

Multicultural Education from page 3

- review and refinement of the multicultural aspects of the district's curriculum.

These actions should be driven by the single objective of improving student performance. While these recommendations may seem like standard operating procedures, there is a process that brings them closer to home for each school board and board member.

This process is referred to as the "three sets of three questions" strategy (R.G.H.Siu, *The Craft of Power*, 1979, pp.166-67). Devised as an essential quick check on the soundness of any major proposal, the "three sets" deal with three levels — personal, ramifications, and contingencies.

The personal questions. The first set of questions is a personal series. Before the board moves ahead, ask yourself these three simple questions:

- Does the proposition add up?
- Does it sound okay?
- Does it feel right?

If the answers to all three questions are yes, then there is a good chance that you and your board are on the right track. But, if one or more answers is/are no, then you (and the board) might rethink the whole issue. The first question requires an understanding of the kinds of policy action required for various types of educational propositions.

The second question calls upon your ability to put yourself in the shoes of those persons who will be affected by your decision and anticipate/understand their points of view. The final question is the ultimate test of boardsmanship: to be able to reach into the mass of potentially conflicting data and arguments surrounding an issue and pull out the best solution.

The ramifications questions. The second set of three questions focuses on the ramifications of a proposed solution; the so-what-happens-then test.

When the board is faced with a complicated situation, such as that implied in multicultural education, ask these questions:

- What will happen? What will this decision bring, good and bad, in terms of the district's objective to improve student performance? To improve the district's objective in multicultural education?

*If the answer(s) makes sense,
then ask:*

- What should we do to implement the decision? Can we do it? How can we do it? *When you have answered these questions, ask:*
- And then what? What do we expect to be the results of the decision?

What long-range planning process do we have in place or need to assure continuing evaluation and modification?

If you and/or your board cannot work your way through the ramifications cycle, you will need to reassess the original proposition and reconsider the solution.

The contingency questions. The third set of questions, the three what-ifs, assume that the plan is approved and being implemented. It is then time to ask:

- What if the district or target population changes its mind about the plan?
- What if community make-up changes, the budget decreases again, the district is merged....(add your own what-ifs?)
- What if the people (staff and parents) upon whom the district was depending to spearhead the effort go somewhere else?

These three sets of three questions let us test our premises to see if they are sound, our practices to be sure they are effective, and our emotions to ensure that they are genuine. If our responses

are basically positive, then our programs will stand the test of experience.

"Talk does not cook rice," says the old proverb. Your school board must be a board of action to meet the challenges of education in the 1990s. Asking these questions will help you to increase the ability of your board to take effective, efficient action.

This article is presented as an effort to highlight some aspects of diversity and multicultural education. The debate between the various perspectives provides education policymakers with an opportunity to move beyond our early endeavors to provide a common cultural base for our children; not to replace it, but to expand it. Through "working the issue," we can expand our sense of what is needed today and overcome resistance, brought on by fear of so many changes, to multicultural education and cross-cultural communications.

We now have the chance to call upon the vibrant aspects and principles that comprise the cultural and racial diversity in the United States; to look at and appreciate and accept the rich and varied heritages of our many peoples. ■

Dr. Carl Mack is the superintendent of the Del Rosa Heights School District, Sacramento, California. Dr. Mack and the Del Rosa Heights School Board have seen a remarkable demographic change in their student population during the last 10 years, from a nearly total single racial population to one representing five major racial and ethnic groups. The numbers are fascinating: Within the 10-year timeframe, the student population more than tripled. During that time, a 98 percent African American student population decreased to 43 percent. Asian students, representing five different cultures, now represent 28 percent of the school population; White students, 15 percent; Hispanic students, 11 percent; and Native American students, three percent. Dr. Mack estimates that 35 percent of the school district's students speak 11 languages.